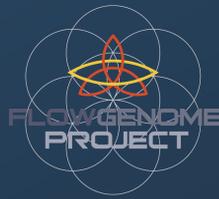


# ETHICAL CULT CHECKLIST



**N.B.** this is intended as an open-source charter agreement by which divergent groups voluntarily agree to operate by these best practices when playing in the domains of *ecstasis*, *catharsis* and *communitas*. (similar to membership requirements in the UN that typically mandate at least an aspirational commitment towards free and fair democratic elections, rule of law, free trade, civil liberties/humanitarian rights etc.) You are free to operate as a rogue state, but if you would like access to the finances, intelligence and network effects of the UN, you choose to play by those general rules or risk censure, sanction or expulsion.

Alternately, a charter like this might function like Standard and Poor's ratings—so as an entrepreneur you're free to pursue whatever financial and business practices you'd like, but you might have your bonds downgraded from AAA to B to "Junk" status as a red flag for all but the most foolhardy or specialist investor.

*Caveat emptor.*

## "Culty Cult" Checklist: Things Not To Do

01

### Grabbing the One Ring of Power\*\*\*

Don't be Boromir or Sauruman thinking they will bend it, not that it will bend them, be like Gandalf and Galadriel—wise enough to know better. This one is non-negotiable.



#### A) Mythologized Origin Story of the Founder

Carefully curated, often repeated tales of exceptional conditions surrounding birth, childhood, early signs of prodigious talent/insight, Dark Night of Soul/Road to Damascus conversion experience, etc that uniquely positions this person to lead. In extreme cases, confirmed with self-appointed name change.

#### B) Absolutist Claims of Attainment

Spiritual, intellectual, sexual, entrepreneurial, artistic—typically reserved for founder, occasionally extended to inner circle. Once claimed, all dissonance in relation to founder must be either signs of supplicants' blind spots/projections or deliberate "crazy wisdom" being offered to liberate the subject—*never* signs of the founder's fallibility or humanity. This often extends beyond infallibility of the founder to the completeness and totality of their worldview—which is presumed to be comprehensive and supersedes all other modes of knowing and sense-making (see Robert Anton Wilson's notion of *reality tunnels*). Two of the most prevalent expressions (often appearing together) are the 1-2 punch of absolute Enlightenment (with the leader implicitly or explicitly claiming such status) and a Neo-Vedanta/New Thought/Gnostic dismissal of objective reality as illusory or "matrix-like" in favor of the power of mind, visualization or positive thinking.



#### C) Ritualized Separation

Keeping leader distinct from operational tasks, duties and common mingling. Most often done by adoption of Eastern monastic hierarchic traditions and terminology (like *Satsang*), but can also be accomplished by simple "celebrity handling" such as use of bouncers, green rooms, stage settings (ornate seating, lilly/lotus flower arrangements, altars, dressing in white, or robes, or vestments of some non street clothes variety) that keep the leader apart from the community except in controlled and/or stylized encounters.



02

### Creating IN/OUT Groups\*

#### A) Messianic Purpose

The micro (of the community) is the macro (of the world) and the value of the work being done within the cloister has significance far beyond the lives of those directly practicing it. This sets up both potential grandiosity of a world saving mission, and also can be used to suppress personal needs and concerns as petty, selfish or small-minded in comparison (such as compensation vs. volunteer labor). In extreme cases, it may also invoke a "crypto-Puritanism" where those inside the group are considered pure, saved, enlightened or gifted, while those beyond the group are tainted, compromised or in need of help, saving or redemption



#### B) Specialized Language

Often using novel terms to describe or redefine everyday concepts, introduction of either pseudo spiritual or pseudo scientific terms to convey legitimacy on otherwise unprovable truth claims. Increasing lack of interoperability with everyday language or concepts of mainstream discourse, family members, etc.

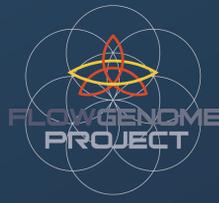


#### C) Break with Past Precedents

Very rarely do cultic leaders situate themselves within a lineage that would subject them to a rubric or critique larger than themselves by others older or wiser than themselves (living or dead). Instead, they tend to declare a "clean slate" even if their own development began within a school or tradition. That immunity against precedent extends to charges of cultic behavior, as these leaders will often volunteer extended critiques of past gurus with feet of clay, holding their own transmission up as a corrective exemplar. They may even declare a complete break with the aggregate Human Condition—i.e. that they represent an end to suffering, ego, conditioning, fear, trauma etc. that has never been accomplished before (or has only be accomplished by Axial Age greats-- Buddha, Jesus, Mohammed, Lao Tzu etc).



# ETHICAL CULT CHECKLIST



03

## Weaponizing Peak Experience and Healing

### A) Tightly Controlled/Scripted Access\*



To techniques of ecstasy (drugs, sex, breathwork, music/dance, prayer, charismatic transmission, deprivation) as well as techniques of catharsis (bodywork, encounter type group sessions, personal inquiry, specialized diets, cleanses, etc.) Rarely are unsanctioned access and insights that contradict group norms or leader's framing accepted as valid, and are often discouraged or suppressed

### B) An emphasis on regressive practices that emphasize feeling over thinking\*\*\*



And an inoculation against thinking/discernment as signs of ego, projection, resistance that is to be trusted less than either the "truths" of catharsis/trauma release or the insights and framing of the leader. Because the very methods of personal discernment (aka "trusting my gut") and logical critique are already discounted, even the most thoughtful and accurate concerns can be *ipso facto* dismissed as products of ego, projections or other suspect modes of knowing—there is no way to crack the facade from within it.

### C) Key decisions and commitments encouraged or forced while in non-ordinary states\*\*\*



Whether testaments of love, allegiance, atonement or payment, these groups use the softened boundaries and impaired judgment of euphoric peak states or cathartic release as times to secure emotional, social or financial commitments from members who are encouraged to equate the visceral "truths" of the state they are in with the validity of all the prior truth claims above.

## Also to Note:

### \*False Negatives:

Many positive communities of practice will check several of these boxes (especially those under **Point 2** and **3a**). This is because certain group dynamics function as "deep structures" and have a tendency to emerge as natural parts of the collective meaning-making of tribal primates. To differentiate between a healthy vs. pathological expression of a given behavior, an observer will need to exercise careful discernment and triangulate between all elements.

### \*\*False Positives:

Many cult-like communities will initially present with palpable energy, enthusiasm, celebration, joy, and growth, precisely *because* they are harnessing many of the techniques described above. This can create cognitive dissonance for someone applying the "by their fruits ye shall know them" filter—while the fruits appear to be abundant. Using charismatic transmission, encouraging regressive catharsis, controlling ecstatic rituals of bonding, and advocating for magical thinking consistently produce potent effects quickly. It is not that they don't work, it's that they work only too well, (until they inevitably don't).

### \*\*\*Faustus vs. Icarus (i.e. "deal with the Devil" or arrogance):

Often, especially after a scandal or community collapse, pundits will label the leader as a fraud (they were simply pretending to be spiritual and really only wanted money, sex, fame, power. Everyone who followed them was duped, etc.). In reality, it's rarely that cut and dried. As often, the leader had some remarkable skills and insights (how they came to their own teaching and community in the first place), and it was only over time that things visibly degraded/imploded. This is almost always due to **Point 1**—Grabbing the One Ring, which disconnects the leader from their humanity and feedback and **Points 3B&C** (state priming and regressive emotionality) which disconnects followers from their agency and discernment. Those are red flags/deal breakers. It is exceptionally rare for a leader to endorse any of those behaviors and not have significant blindspots/ulterior motive, that even if not immediately apparent, will corrode the community over time.